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The Journey to the Top: Stories on the Intersection of Race and Gender for African American Women in Academia and Business

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Keywords

African American women, Leadership, Higher Education, Business, African American women in academia, African American women in business, Intersectionality



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Deanna R. Davis

Abstract

This research study was designed to determine how the intersection of race and gender identities contributed to the elements of leadership development as perceived by eight African American female executives in academia and business. The researcher sought to explore strategies future leaders might utilize to address leadership development and career ascendency for African American females who aspire to leadership roles. A phenomenological research method was most appropriate for this research study to capture the lived experiences of individuals from their perspectives and to develop themes that challenged structural or normative assumptions.

This research study examined leadership development of eight African American female leaders in two distinct enterprises: academia and business. In both sectors, changes prompted by economic challenges, competition, globalization, and demographic projections have significantly challenged the ability to develop leadership capabilities among African American women. While women have been entering the workforce in greater numbers and making progress into management and professional positions, access to senior leadership ranks remains limited for African American women. As evidenced by studies recorded in the literature, it is prudent to investigate the leadership development modalities required to identify and develop African American female leaders.

Key Words: African American women, Leadership, Higher Education, Business, African American women in academia, African American women in business, Intersectionality

Introduction

Traditional leadership theories have tended to focus on males who assumed positions of power and authority in dominant culture organizations (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). This predominant model was based on a White-male hierarchical model of control and competitive behavior (Loden, 1985). Since White men were the ones who managed organizations successfully, White women and women of color were not considered; they were invisible. Kanter (1977) postulated that women, who were viewed in terms of social category stereotypes, had to adapt to a stereotypical belief of leadership. Eagly (2005) posited when leadership is defined in masculine terms, “the leaders who emerge are disproportionately men, regardless of the sex composition of the community of followers” (p. 463).

There have been an increasing number of studies conducted on female managers and leaders that attempt to identify key success factors or pitfalls (Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1982). Most of the research has been done with women at lower levels or in small organizations.

Research has also been conducted on how gender might influence leadership (Waring, 2003). While some scholars have studied African American female leaders from a sociological perspective, few studies have researched how race and gender interacts to inform their leadership development (Collins, 1990; Stanley, 2009; Byrd, 2009). Furthermore, rarely is intersectionality considered and even less frequently are discussions of how one's race and gender might influence one's conception of leadership in academia and business.

To capture the qualities of leaders that facilitate positive outcomes, leadership theorists are attempting to more fully delineate the qualities that constitute good leadership (Eagly, 2005). When the female gender role is inconsistent with a leader role, prejudice toward women as leaders is a common outcome. People are unaccustomed in many organizational contexts to women possessing substantial authority that encompasses decision-making power (Eagly, 2005). Eagly (2005) contends that "not only do people doubt that women possess the appropriate competencies, but also they may resent the overturning of the expected and usual hierarchical relation between the sexes" (p. 465).

The purpose of this study was to explore the intersectionality of race and gender for African American women through their lived experiences of how they developed as leaders. This research study aimed to address the importance of studying the experiences of African American women to better understand the origins and conceptions of their development as leaders.

Theoretical Framework

According to Parker (2005), intersectionality is a means for analyzing and interpreting the experiences that African American women encounter while holding positions of authority in predominantly White organizations. African American women have a connection through race and gender within society and can identify with other African American women from this perspective. Stanley (2009) surmised that through intersectionality, "the lived experiences of African American women are not located within separate spheres of race, gender and social class. Rather, these spheres intersect and shape social realities that are not captured within traditional feminist discourse" (p. 552).

The feminist theories of intersectionality articulate a framework for understanding the complexities of minority women's identities and experiences. Intersectionality refers to the ways in which social and cultural constructs interact (i.e. race and gender) and is useful in better understanding the complexities of the dual status that African American female leaders face in the workplace (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). Black and multiracial feminist theories argue that gender and race are socially constructed categories that contain inherent power differences (Collins, 2000). Parker (2005) described intersectionality as a means of interpreting and analyzing the experiences that African American women encounter while holding positions of authority in predominately White organizations. When the spheres of race, gender and social class intersect they shape social realities and the multiple dimensions of the lived experiences of African American women (Parker, 2005). One's history, culture and values provide a frame of reference for making meaning of common experiences. Hence, African American women view the world from discrete perspectives based on their social positions, positionality, and within the confines of the larger social structures of race and gender (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003).

Due to the fact that there is a lack of research and literature on African American women's leadership and intersectionality of race and gender in predominantly White organizations, this study aims to address the gap. Furthermore, research on African American women as leaders is often subsumed within feminist literature (Stanley, 2009), and as such does

not contribute to the understanding, or lack of understanding, of the intersectionality of race and gender that African American women face in their leadership development. Therefore, articulating how racial and gendered identities inform the leadership development experiences of African American women in academia and business is needed to challenge the traditional discourse. It is also useful for understanding the leadership experiences of this group.

Intersectionality denotes the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). For the African American women in the study, almost all of them felt the impact of both race and gender discrimination in their careers. The combination of race and gender for African American women still hinders the potential for their ascension to senior-level positions.

Race and gender are interlocking social constructs and are not separate entities that intersect, but are completely bound to one another, incapable of being separated (Collins, 1990). Through the lenses of the study participants, their race and gender converged as one, and thus, could not be separated. Feelings of race and gender bias resonated with all of the participants as they discussed intersectionality in the workplace. For these women, race did not trump their gender, nor did gender trump their race. In their development as leaders, they faced a double jeopardy despite their leadership abilities.

Background of the Problem

Traditionally, the dominant organizational culture in academia and business has conceptualized African American women as outsiders (Combs, 2003; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Collins, 2000). Thus, the pathway to leadership development in the workplace has been faced with unique challenges and risk for this population. Some African American women leaders may elect to diminish their personal identity or self-concept within the workplace in an effort to maximize their perceived leadership (Bell, 1990). As a result, African American female leaders may refrain from a full authentic expression of self in the workplace in order to achieve organizational acceptance and credibility. This guarded persona may stifle the ability of African American women to develop as leaders (Combs, 2003).

In the 1970s and 1980s, women of color began to theorize about their uniquely disadvantaged position (Almquist, 1987). For women of color, they experienced a double jeopardy of having a non-White ethnic background and being female. According to double jeopardy, "minority women are the primary targets of harassment and discrimination because they face both sexual and ethnic prejudice" (Berdahl & Moore, 2006, p. 427). This fact proposed that women of color faced a double whammy of discrimination (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Beal, 1970). They were discriminated against due to the duality of being both a woman and a member of a minority group. For African American women, the dually subjugated positions play a pivotal role on their development as leaders.

In recent years, Collins (2000) suggests that there is an increasing interest among researchers to understand the experiences of African American women from their own perspectives. However, few studies have focused on the convergence of race and gender and how these spheres inform African American women's leadership development (Stanley, 2009; Byrd, 2009). Waring (2003) posits that to fully understand the plight of African American female leaders' experiences in organizations, we must understand the multiple forms of oppression they encounter. As African Americans, they are subject to both overt and covert racism. As women, they are subjected to the sexism that women face in larger society. However, much of the research that takes place on racism and sexism in the United States

ignores the interaction of race and gender on the lives of African American women (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; Byrd & Stanley, 2009).

According to a study conducted by Ransford & Miller (1983), African American women had a stronger tradition of autonomy and independence characteristics in the workplace, but these proclivities did not grant them access to managerial positions. Women and minorities often face hostile receptions in traditionally male and White-dominated domains, which in turn discouraged them from entering and developing in these organizations (Berdahl & Moore, 2006). Waring (2003) states that the majority of literature on leadership, even the literature which seeks to explore the differences between male and female leaders, does not attend to the differences that race and gender may play in shaping one's leadership development. In addition, the literature is bereft of studies on understanding how double jeopardy for minority women might manifest in organizations (Berdahl & Moore, 2006). This omission has left a gap in our understanding of how African American women's racial and gendered identities influence their development as leaders.

The purpose of this study was to explore the intersectionality of race and gender for African American women through their lived experiences of how they developed as leaders. The goal of the research was to understand how African American women executives made meaning out of their experiences and developed as leaders. A number of studies have addressed the challenges and obstacles African American women face in aspiring and obtaining leadership positions within organizations (Brinson, 2006; Collins, 2000; Parker, 2005). Byrd (2009) posits that "for African American women in predominantly white organizations; race, gender and social class may restrict the process of leadership" (p. 1). Therefore, the thrust of this research was to examine the leadership development of African American women based on the intersection of their racial and gendered identities.

There are a number of significant reasons for understanding the lived experiences that African American women encountered while ascending to leadership positions within academia and business. For example, it is not understood how African American leaders' heightened awareness of racism and sexism affects the way they exercise leadership (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Research data has shown that in 2008, African Americans were approximately 13.9% of the total private labor force and held 3.3 percent of the total executive/senior level positions (League of Black Women, 2011). However, more recent data indicated that in 2010, only 2.4% of the U.S. Fortune 500 chief executives were female (Toegel, 2011). Out of the number of management positions in business, women held 49% of the jobs and 50% of all managerial positions (Toegel, 2011). Moreover in 2011, 8% of all college presidents were African American and African American women represented one-third of that percentage (American Council on Education, 2012).

The low representation of African American women in leadership positions serves to highlight the potential for unique leadership experiences for these women and should serve as an impetus for organizations to increase their representation. By doing so, organizations will fulfill the promise of equal opportunity by providing African American women with opportunities to assume leadership roles. Promoting African American women and a richly diverse group of women into leadership roles will help academia and businesses to maximize their human capital and become more inclusive. Indeed, research conducted by Catalyst (2004) showed a strong connection between gender diversity and organizational financial performance; as the number of women at the top increases, so does financial success. As more women occupy positions of leadership, questions as to whether they lead in a different manner from men will provide rich

insight into their leadership abilities. Based on this inquiry, this research study focused on African American women who have broken through the glass ceiling, maneuvered the concrete wall and assumed positions of leadership and power within dominant enterprises.

The significance of this study was to describe the personal and professional experiences of African American women in their accession to leadership positions. The data gathered was analyzed to understand the lived experiences and stories of African American women became leaders in academia and corporate America. In the future, this exploration may provide information to individuals interested in the career paths of these African American female leaders. This research is important given the increasing demographic changes in society in which more opportunities are available for African American women to ascend into leadership roles in professional organizations.

Leadership Development in African American Women

The emergence of Black female leadership in the United States represents a struggle for liberation from oppression and a means to uplift the Black community out of racial, educational and economic subjugation (Rosser-Mims, 2010). Throughout history, African American women have had to contend with sexism from African American men, as well as racism and class oppression from White females and males (Collins, 2000). Oftentimes, African American women had been denied access and opportunities to lead and perceived as better followers than leaders. According to Allen (1997), “Black women essentially have been forced to create safe havens from the hostile work environments that prohibited personal growth and community survival” (p. 64). In essence, Black female leaders emerged from and were largely shaped by external and internal forces that affected their everyday lived experiences. An important issue for women and minorities is the perceived lack of opportunities for executive leadership positions. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics (1999), gender bias was a determinant when women and minorities were passed over for promotions. Carli and Eagly (2001) posit that leadership has been construed as a position with special challenges not suited for women. Stanley (2009) found evidence “that there is an absence of theories that explain and, more importantly, expose how the existence of race, gender, and social class may affect an individual’s experience and therefore restrict the capacity to effectively learn and perform” (p. 554).

According to Linehan (2001), barriers exist because women and minorities have been, for the most part, excluded from the “good old boy” networks that usually are composed of individuals who hold power and status in an organization. Linehan further stated that “for African American women who are educated and have the competencies to perform in leadership positions, the lack of power, status, race and gender oftentimes impedes their opportunities” (p. 825). Social stratification within organizations can ultimately determine who moves up the career ladder. Oftentimes, African American women are excluded from stepping onto the ladder in the first place.

The underrepresentation of African American women in leadership positions can be attributed to sociological barriers and organizational structures. In the 1980s, there was a dramatic change occurring in the workplace due to global competition and technological advancements (Almquist, 1987). Corporate leaders had to prepare and adapt to these changes in their traditional management philosophies (Almquist, 1987). However, organizations did not embrace recruitment practices that emphasized recruitment of women and minorities for these newly created positions. Catalyst (2005) suggested that the primary barriers to the advancement

of women and minorities were not their leadership competencies, but what could be done to overcome the cultural perceptions that had become obstacles for them.

Research Study

The goal of a researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the information that emerges (Van Manen, 1997). In order to understand the meaning of the phenomenon, the researcher needs to be able to suspend or bracket any preconceived ideas for defining the phenomenon's basic elements and essential structure (Creswell, 2009, Berg, 2004; Van Manen, 1997). Phenomenology requires at least some understanding of the broader philosophical assumptions, and these should be identified by the researcher (Creswell, 2007). At the root of phenomenology is, "the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms – to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person personally" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). Thus for this study, a phenomenological approach is best suited to examine the lived experiences of African American female leaders to understand their experiences and the meaning they derived from their development as leaders.

This research study examined the leadership development of several African American female leaders in two distinct enterprises: academia and business. The focus of the study was based on African American women who were able to achieve leadership positions despite the glass ceiling. The following research question guided this study:
In what ways did race and gender identities inform African American women leadership development experiences?

The phenomenological method of inquiry had three sub-questions:

1. In what ways did race inform their development as leaders?
2. In what ways did gender inform their development as leaders?
3. In what ways did the intersection of race and gender inform their development as leaders?

The study involved conducting eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women in managerial and supervisory responsibility. The criteria included women who were in president, vice-presidents or equivalent positions in organizations in academia and corporate America. Senior-level positions consisted of Chief Executive Officers; presidents; senior vice-presidents; vice-presidents and deans. Each participant in the study met the following criteria:

- (a) Five years or more experience in senior-level positions in either her current organization or a combination of positions;
- (b) Organizational supervision responsibilities for over more than 20 individuals with at least 3 direct reports;
- (c) Employed at a large organization or an institution that employs at least 500 employees; and
- (d) Large fiduciary and budget management responsibility over their units.

Demographic Information

The participants were selected because they were African American women in senior leadership positions in academia and business. Eight African American women from five colleges and three businesses were purposefully selected to participate in the study. At the end of each interview, the participants provided demographical background about their marital status, number of children, years of employment and ages. The age ranges of the participants were

between 40-72 years of age with an average age of 45. The average years of employment were 15 to 41 years in their respective professions. Six (75%) out of the eight participants had children. The average number of children for the participants ranged from none to two children. Out of the study participants, four were married, one divorced and three were single.

Data Collection

The participants in the study responded to semi-structured, open-ended questions based on reflections of their lived experiences as African American female leaders. Moustakas (1994) explained the “method of reflection that occurs throughout the phenomenological approach provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience” (p. 47).

For this phenomenological study, the researcher interviewed African American women in academia and business who were in top senior level executives. Interviews with each participant were conducted to capture their stories and ceased when the interviewees refrained from introducing new perspectives on the research topic. Kensit (2000) posited that researchers are cautioned to allow the data to emerge while conducting phenomenological studies because engaging in phenomenology means capturing rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings (p. 104). The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework but remaining true to the facts (Groenewald, 2004). Through semi-structured, in-depth interviewing, the researcher was able to capture the true essence of each participant’s experience with the phenomenon under study. The qualitative, in-depth interviews were more like conversations rather than formal events with predetermined response categories (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The researcher anticipated that the phenomenon of interest would unfold as the participants relayed their views and experiences. Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggested that the most important aspect of the interviewer’s approach is conveying the attitude that the participant’s view is valuable and useful.

Findings and Interpretation of the Results

The Intersection of Race and Gender

Through their early experiences, these women expressed that they had the tenacity to forge ahead and become successful. There was something remarkable in the minds of these African American women that they knew they had to succeed and beat the odds. Family and early experiences were integral in planting the seeds for cultivating their desire to become leaders. The women learned that the role their parents and families played in instilling confidence in them at an early age, was integral in laying a foundation for them to achieve and believe in themselves. Even when they were faced with adversity, their early exposure to self-pride and self-reliance enabled them to succeed in difficult situations. By growing up in environments that had a strong legacy of survival, determination and discipline, these African American women had been instilled with the characteristics that predestined them for success. The women in this research shared some common and typical experiences when confronted with their race and gender identities. The participants were linked together in the sameness of their gender, racial classification, and the leadership prowess for which they are recognized. Listening to the eight African American women stories made it possible to gain insight into how race and gender informed their leadership development in the workplace. Their responses made it possible to get a glimpse of the different lenses they used to synthesize and interpret their

experiences. Conversations about their race and gender overwhelmingly impacted their development as leaders. Almost all of the participants felt that being a Black woman was not two mutually exclusive categories. Both social constructs merged together to form who they were. Through their lenses, they were African American women. From their vantage point, they were first, perceived as a Black woman and second, experienced leadership development as a Black woman in the workplace.

When asked the question about how had race and gender shaped their development as a leader, the participants confessed that being a Black woman meant that they would always be challenged, rendered invisible, and the realization that things are different for them than for others. African American women in leadership positions experience a profusion of race and gender stereotypes. For the African American participants in the study, their race and gender has negatively affected their careers. Some of the participants reported experiences of being invisible, voiceless, discriminated, isolated, undermined, treated unfairly, oppressed, challenged and demoted. These negative experiences of race and gender discrimination seemed to dominate the conversation when the participants reflected on their past experiences.

Cooper (1998) argued that “Black women, restricted from directly participating in many facets of political, economic and social life, and ignored by White men, but also by Black men and White women, have a unique perspective that, if heard, would benefit not just Black women but all of society” (p. 117). The strength, fortitude and determination that defined these African American women demonstrated their ability to rise above adversity and forge ahead into leadership roles. The leadership experiences of African American female executives are entrenched in a landscape that is often characterized by experiences of perception, disparities, and contradictions. While the African American female leaders in this study have developed their leadership competencies and are confident in their leadership abilities, they still lead under a weighted canopy of scrutiny and predictions of failure. Even among adversity, these women demonstrated resiliency and did not rely solely on the perceptions of others.

As discussed, intersectionality denotes the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). For the African American women in the study, almost all of the participants felt the impact of both race and gender discrimination in their careers. The combination of race and gender for African American women still hinders the potential for ascension to senior-level positions. Race and gender are interlocking and are not separate entities that intersect with one another but are completely bound up with one another, incapable of being separated (Collins, 1990). Through the lenses of the study participants, their race and gender converged as one and thus could not be separated. Thus, feelings of racial and gender bias resonated with all of the participants. For these women, race did not trump their gender nor did gender trump their race. In their development as leaders, they faced a double bind despite their leadership abilities.

According to Catalyst (2010), research shows that a lack of mentoring opportunities is a frequent barrier to advancement for women and people of color. This research study showed that African American women recognize the vital role of mentoring other African American females, but not enough mentoring relationships are established to prepare African women for leadership roles. By paying it forward, the experiences of African American women senior leaders could provide a roadmap for African American women aspiring to advance to senior leadership roles in academia and business. Participants emphasized the importance of providing guidance to other African American females to add value to the growth and success of future African American women leaders. The experience of each participant could serve as a basis for programs designed

to help young African American women starting their careers to have a smoother journey up the career ladder.

Relevance of the Results

The results of the study will be significant to the study of leadership development because the study involved understanding the lived experiences of African American women who advanced to senior leadership roles. Furthermore, the stories that surfaced from this study will advise aspiring African American women on how to obtain and sustain leadership positions which may prove valuable for increasing the representation of minority women in senior level positions in academia and corporate America. The facts still remain the same that African American women are not represented in leadership positions in academia and corporate America. According to the American Council on Education's (ACE) national data in 2012, 87% of U.S. college presidents both male and female were White. Out of that number, women made up 26% of all college presidents. Of the women college presidents across the nation in 2011, 81% were White and only 8 percent were African American (ACE, 2012). For higher education, the results from the current study can be viewed as a cornerstone to validate the need for more women of color in academia and the barriers that these women face. Of the more than 35,000 senior executive positions within most Fortune 500 companies, it is estimated that only 3.2% or fewer than 800 are African American (The St. Louis American, 2012). Even worse, the number of Fortune 100 board seats held by African Americans has actually declined. In 2012, there were only six African American CEO's, roughly one percent of the chief executive officers in Fortune 500 companies, and out of those six, only one was an African American woman (The St. Louis American, 2012). Thus, the outcomes of this study might also provide an understanding of the experience of African American women and the contributions of these women as a collective group in executive positions.

Implications for Practice

The significance of this research was for understanding the leadership development experiences of African American women; this is necessary for improving leadership development opportunities for these women as emerging leaders in academia and business. Research on the impact of race and gender on African American women's leadership development in academia and business is understudied. Therefore, this study could provide a framework for African American women who aspire to leadership positions in academia and business, and a reference point for academic and business sectors who seek to eliminate cultural barriers and obstacles that stunt the upward mobilization of African American women in their organizations. Based on their responses, they felt that African American women who demonstrated resilience, integrity, intrapersonal characteristics, and social skills were more likely to climb the career ladder within their respective organizations. In particular, sponsorship stood out as the type of leadership development that highly influenced the participants' career advancement to senior level positions. Thus, African American women who aspire to become leaders must be willing to step outside their comfort zones to establish a network of people who are different from them and who hold higher rank or positions. Establishing strategic relationships in the academic or corporate structure is a valuable tool for African American women to gain access to higher-level promotions and career opportunities.

In addition, African American women who seek to attain high-level positions often need support. To this end, the researcher recommends that African American women, who have

succeeded at moving up the ladder in academia and business, establish mentoring and leadership programs. These programs should target African American women who are in the early stages of their careers by, providing guidance in developing personal characteristics and professional attributes; exploring topics focused on sponsorship and networking; engaging discussions dealing with race and gender; increasing understanding of organizational culture; and sharing the importance of providing opportunities for others.

Finally, based on the results of this study, academia and corporate America can partner with African American women leaders to create a corporate culture that encourages more opportunities for African American women to advance. Organizational leaders must make concerted efforts to identify and recruit talented African American women into senior-level positions. Furthermore, academia and business must go beyond viewing African American women as a means to satisfy quotas and enforce diversity goals through human resource practices or training and development that focus on retaining their talents. Most importantly, organizations must be willing to create policies and environments for African American women to establish positive relationships with mentors and sponsors at higher levels who can be influential in their professional success.

Conclusion

Organizations, researchers, scholars and practitioners may use the findings of the study by focusing on the intersectionality theoretical framework that addresses race and gender in organizations and leadership practices (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). The study of intersectionality is urgent because it allows researchers to go beyond the individually informed perspective that they inevitably bring to scholarship and science (Shields, 2008). Walker (2003) points out that “the attempt to understand intersectionality is, in fact, an effort to see things from the worldview of others and not simply from our own unique standpoints” (p. 991). In essence, intersectionality articulates a politics of survival for African American women. All of the African American female leaders in the current study believed that differential treatment based on their race and gender in their specific organizations influenced their leadership development. Each of the participants expressed their confidence and leadership prowess as African American female leaders within dominant culture organizational environments. Research that describes how marginalized groups operate or function in the face of their oppression can be helpful in the formulation of a political framework of liberation.

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